

(UNCLASSIFIED PAPER)

AD-A240 239



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Ground Reconnaissance Support  
of  
Marine Air/Ground Task Force (MAGTF) Operations  
in the 21st Century

by

Frank W. Hicks  
Lieutenant Colonel, USMC

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

10 May 1991

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Paper directed by  
Colonel George Ingersol, USA

Department of  
Operations

91-10502





## REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1a REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION <b>UNCLASSIFIED</b> SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY			1b RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS		
2b DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE			3 DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF REPORT DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited		
4 PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)			5 MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)		
6a NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION <b>OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT</b>		6b OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable) <b>C</b>	7a NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION		
6c ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) <b>NAVAL WAR COLLEGE NEWPORT, R.I. 02841</b>			7b ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)		
8a NAME OF FUNDING/SPONSORING ORGANIZATION		8b OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable)	9. PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER		
8c ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)			10 SOURCE OF FUNDING NUMBERS		
			PROGRAM ELEMENT NO.	PROJECT NO.	TASK NO.
11 TITLE (Include Security Classification) <b>Ground Reconnaissance Support of Marine Air/Ground Task Force (MAGTF) Operations in the 21st Century (U)</b>					
12 PERSONAL AUTHOR(S) <b>LIEUTENANT COLONEL FRANK W. HICKS, USMC</b>					
13a TYPE OF REPORT <b>FINAL</b>		13b TIME COVERED FROM _____ TO _____		14. DATE OF REPORT (Year, Month, Day) <b>10 MAY 1991</b>	
15 PAGE COUNT <b>25</b>					
16 SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION <b>A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.</b>					
17 COSATI CODES			18 SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)		
FIELD	GROUP	SUB-GROUP	GROUND RECONNAISSANCE SUPPORT OF MAGTF OPERATIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY		
19 ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number) <p>Current planning and organization of organic ground reconnaissance and surveillance forces in support of MAGTF operations are rapidly becoming overtaken by events. Development of highly mobile, long-range, rapid execution of over-the-horizon sea-based maritime operations in support of the CINCs is outstripping current corps ground reconnaissance doctrine. This unclassified paper points out that the special requirements of the way the Corps plans to operate in the future will necessitate concomitant changes in how ground reconnaissance elements are deployed and employed. Further, it points out that there is a serious flaw in the organization of maritime special purpose forces which could lead to the inability to deliver on advertised special operations capabilities to the CINCs. Recommendations are made for the adjustment of current doctrine, employment and organization of reconnaissance units and organizations in order to align them with the problems outlined in the paper.</p>					
20 DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED <input type="checkbox"/> SAME AS RPT <input type="checkbox"/> DTIC USERS			21 ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION <b>UNCLASSIFIED</b>		
22a NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL <b>CHAIRMAN, OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT</b>			22b TELEPHONE (Include Area Code) <b>841-3414</b>		22c OFFICE SYMBOL <b>C</b>

Abstract of:

GROUND RECONNAISSANCE SUPPORT OF  
MARINE AIF/GROUND TASK FORCE OPERATIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Current planning and organization of organic ground reconnaissance and surveillance forces in support of MAGTF operations are rapidly becoming overtaken by events. Development of highly mobile, long-range, rapid execution of over-the-horizon sea-based maritime operations in support of the CINCs is outstripping current Corps ground reconnaissance doctrine. This unclassified paper points out that the special requirements of the way the Corps plans to operate in the future will necessitate concomitant changes in how ground reconnaissance elements are deployed and employed. Further, it points out that there is a serious flaw in the organization of maritime special purpose forces which could lead to the inability to deliver on advertised special operations capabilities to the CINCs. Recommendations are made for the adjustment of current doctrine, employment and organization of reconnaissance units and organizations in order to align them with the problems outlined in the paper.



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## LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	PAGE
1. Surveillance, Reconnaissance, and Intelligence Group (SRIG) . . . . .	6
2. Interrelationship of the Types of Reconnaissance . . . . .	7
3. Marine Division . . . . .	8
4. Reconnaissance Battalion, Marine Division . . . . .	9
5. The 18 Special Operations Missions . . . . .	13
6. Maritime Special Operations Special Skills/Training . . . . .	14
7. MAGTF(SOC) Maritime Special Purpose Forces . . . . .	15
8. Current Reconnaissance Units/Organizations . . . . .	18
9. Proposed Reorganization of Reconnaissance Units/Organizations . . . . .	19

As the services bathe in the afterglow of Operation Desert Storm and sort out the lessons learned and evaluate the performance of people, organizations and equipment, much attention will be afforded the intelligence community and its information gathering assets and organizations. Much credit will be justifiably deserved by the efforts associated with all of the high technology methods such as satellite imagery, photo reconnaissance, remotely piloted vehicles, seismic intrusion devices, and other mechanical devices which served to provide information. Historical certitude allows a prediction, however, that in the end there is no real substitute for having a human being on location in the objective area, reporting what he sees and assisting operations through direct action. Such is the unique importance of the reconnaissance establishment and its contribution to operations. In the end, however, I believe we will find that the success of the reconnaissance organizations will be because of the small unit initiative and the tenacity of individuals, not because we have deployed and employed these units in the most efficient and effective manner. As we progress into the unique challenges of the 21st century, the time has come to reassess the doctrine for the deployment, employment and organization of the "eyes and ears" of the Corps.

In his 1991 address to the Congress, General Gray stated:

The ability to maintain influence by sustained forward presence and, when needed, to project power ashore in distant regions of the world is a fundamental capability for successful execution of a stability strategy. We believe that Navy Marine Corps expeditionary forces will continue to provide a significant portion of this required capability. Our naval forces are already structured and, more important, already postured to maintain forward presence and to be the lead elements of our power

projection capability in many of our Nation's regions of interest . . . These operations will evolve from an initial presence by forward-deployed naval forces--most likely a carrier battle group and an amphibious force that includes a special operations capable Marine air-ground task force. 1

Desert Shield/Storm was a great conventional victory. Unfortunately, it was not an expeditionary one! As the Corps now withdraws from Southwest Asia, it must now reorient to its expeditionary responsibilities as the premier force in readiness of the United States and as the instrument of maritime power projection for the CINCs. Our continuing development of highly mobile, long-range, rapid execution of over-the-horizon sea-based maritime operations in support of the CINCs is outstripping our current doctrine for planning and execution of ground reconnaissance and surveillance in support of those operations. In the future, particularly at the low end of the spectrum of conflict, accurate information gathered by organic assets coupled with the ability to instantly tap national assets will be the fulcrum for success. In order to prepare for the rapid planning and execution of maritime special operations, sea-based support of low-intensity efforts, rapid execution of future amphibious operations, as well as the prosecution of conventional land ground combat operations in support of theatre commanders, the Corps must rethink its doctrine for the deployment and employment of its reconnaissance elements and organizations. The concomitant changes will necessitate not only a more intimate alignment with other national reconnaissance elements and assets, but will also require the restructuring of existing Marine reconnaissance forces, including the addition of more capability to deployed MAGTFs--a tall order in an already austere manpower

environment.

In order to plan for the prosecution of amphibious operations against the increasingly sophisticated threats possessed by even Third World adversaries, there is no doubt that the Corps must continue to pursue the capability to conduct such operations from over-the-horizon (OTH). The Corps' promulgated concept for OTH calls it a metamorphosis of speed and distance from the traditional World War II concept of the amphibious assault. It is 'a seaward extension of the Marine Corps warfighting philosophy of maneuver warfare.'<sup>2</sup> Realizing that standoff from the coastline will enhance the ability of the amphibious task force to deal with the threat of enemy submarines, air attack, surface attack, shore fires and diminish the mine threat, one of the drawbacks is that the increased distances also exacerbate the difficulty of conducting reconnaissance insert, extraction and reporting. The OTH concept is quite simple--by conducting a thorough reconnaissance in depth, we will attempt to focus on the enemy's weaknesses. We will try to land where he is not, or hopefully in a gap in his defenses. By landing where he does not expect us, we hope to disrupt his decision cycle, confuse him as to where to focus his effort, and create shock and confusion through deception and surprise while we quickly establish ourselves as a creditable fighting force ashore, take our objectives and accomplish our mission. We take every precaution to avoid the enemy's main defenses and strengths and refrain from a firepower/attrition style of warfare which would quickly deplete the limited resources available from transport ships. Finding out where the enemy 'is not' and locating the 'gaps' in

his defenses will be a most difficult task--possibly the task of the organic reconnaissance elements of the MAGTF. The Corps must, however, retain the forcible entry capability necessary to operate at the high end of the amphibious warfare spectrum in consonance with its charter.

Over-the-horizon amphibious operations will pose some unique requirements for the use of all information-gathering assets, but none more challenging than for the employment of Marine air/ground task force (MAGTF) reconnaissance elements. If the task force is to truly threaten 1200 miles of hostile coastline for 24 hours from a position 100 miles at sea, roughly the distance from Cape Canaveral to New York, then the force must have a creditable capability to conduct the necessary beach reconnaissance, hydrographic survey, surf observation, helicopter landing zone reconnaissance, craft landing zone (CLZ for LCAC), etc., necessary for at least primary and alternate landing sites/zones. Additionally, the use of 'smart' weapons during preparation of the battlefield will increase the requirement for reconnaissance inserts capable of using laser designation equipment to direct preparation fires. In view of the increasing requirements, the current Marine expeditionary unit (MEU) ground reconnaissance elements will be only marginally capable of functioning, as will the Sea/Air/Land (SEAL) detachment attached to the amphibious squadron (PHIBRON), without additional organic assets and capabilities. An amphibious Marine expeditionary brigade (MEB) will be truly effective only if task organized with the preponderance of the force reconnaissance elements of the SRIG and a company from the reconnaissance battalion attached to



the GCE.

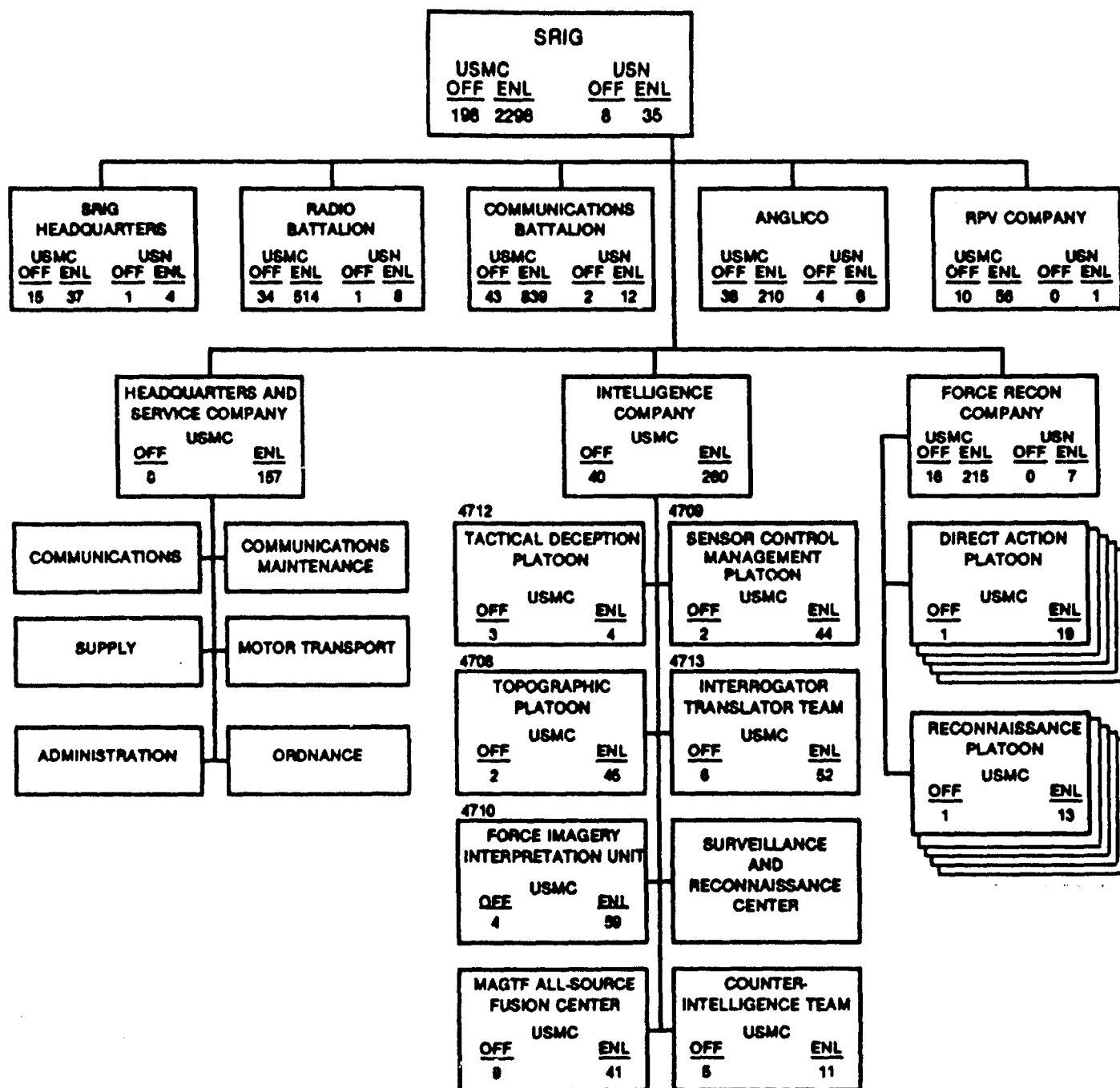
The landings on Granada represent the last truly expeditionary amphibious operation in which the Corps has been involved. Since the amphibious portion of the operation involved only the Mediterranean MEU, only one platoon of the 2d Reconnaissance Battalion was organic to the organization. Had the threat been more sophisticated, the outcome may have been much different. We were fortunate with regard to employment of reconnaissance elements on Granada and we have been well tested conventionally during Desert Storm. Now is the time to step back and realistically assess the employment of our ground reconnaissance organizations across the spectrum of conflict.

Desert Shield/Storm have served to highlight the true rapid deployment and conventional employment capability of the Corps. The deployment involved the use of two amphibious MEBs (4th and 5th MEBs and a MEU(SOC) joined to form a MEF(-) under II MEF HQ), one MEF (I MEF) formed with two Marine divisions (1st and 2d Marine Divisions) as the ground combat element (GCE), a composite Marine air wing (3d MAW) as the air combat element, and a force service support group (1st FSSG) as the combat service support element (CSSE), using both amphibious and maritime prepositioned methods of deployments. As the elements arrived in theatre, they composited into fighting organizations as advertised. Specific information regarding how the reconnaissance elements were employed are not currently available. If they were doctrinally employed, however, the following summary should prove accurate:

The 1st and 2d Force Reconnaissance Companies were most likely consolidated under the 1st Surveillance, Reconnaissance

and Intelligence Group (SRIG) under the MEF headquarters and

FIGURE 1

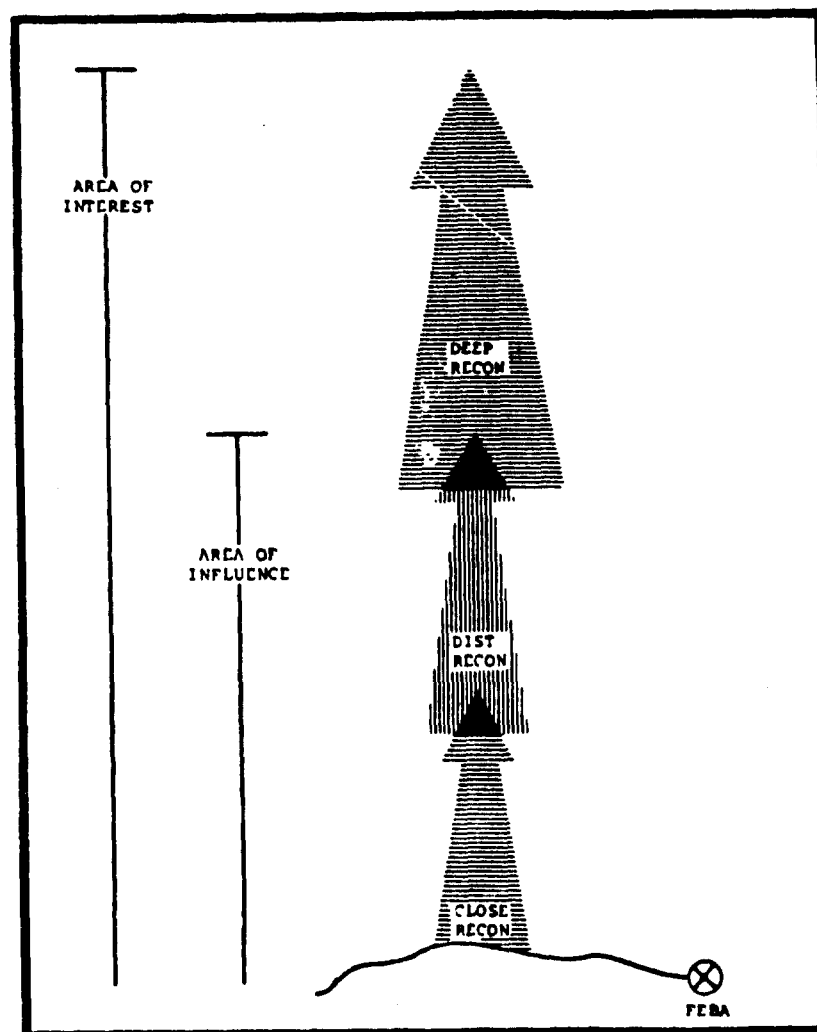


## SURVEILLANCE, RECONNAISSANCE, AND INTELLIGENCE GROUP

acted as the MEF commander's personal reconnaissance/special operations element. These two companies represent the sum total of the active force reconnaissance capability of the Corps. Two

other reserve companies, the 3d Force Reconnaissance Company in Hawaii and the 4th Force Reconnaissance Company in Mobile, Alabama, possibly provided augmentation but are not generally employed as a unit. As with all other Marine reserves, they augment active forces. In theatre, these elements would have provided ground reconnaissance and surveillance in support of the

FIGURE 2



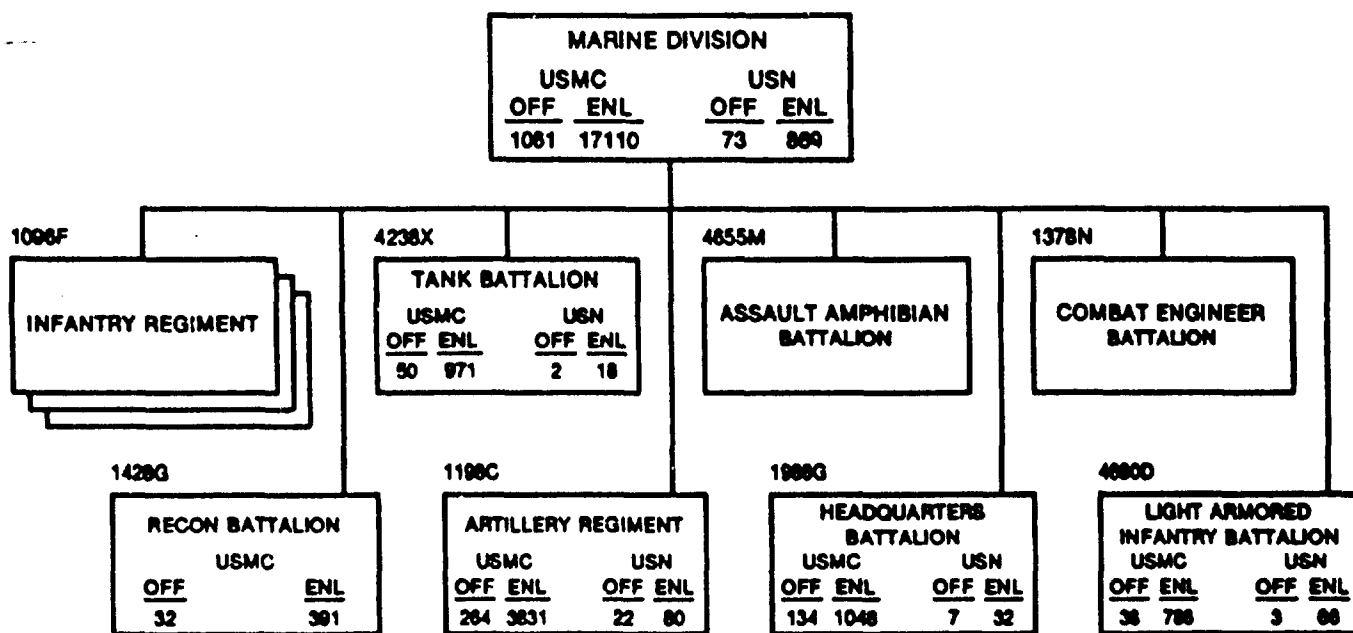
#### INTERRELATIONSHIP OF THE TYPES OF RECONNAISSANCE

MEF and would have been employed outside the artillery fan in the commander's area of interest. Their doctrinal orientation is toward the enemy's rear elements, monitoring main supply routes

(MSRs) and other support operations. The FMFM 6-2 calls this 'deep' reconnaissance. Special operations capabilities of these units will be discussed later.

The 1st and 2d Reconnaissance Battalions would have been consolidated under their respective division commanders, each providing ground reconnaissance and surveillance in support of its parent division in its zone of action. Doctrine states that elements of the division reconnaissance battalion operate under the artillery fan and orient on the rearward elements of the enemy's forward committed elements (Figure 3). Doctrine requires

FIGURE 3



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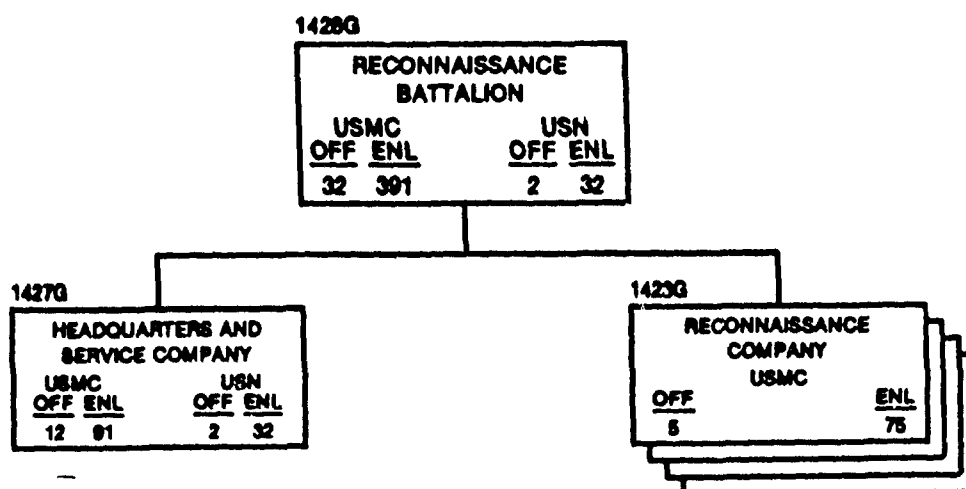
MARINE DIVISION

that the 48 scout teams of 12 platoons and four line companies of the battalion (Figure 4) operate under division control in general support of the division for maximum effectiveness.

Historically, however, elements of the organization are attached to subordinate infantry regiments or even battalions where they

are often misused and abused. I am certain that Desert Shield will prove no exception. Since the Iraqi forces remained in predominantly static positions with a defensive strategy from the beginning, the current doctrinal system of employment may have functioned relatively well. If the situation had been more fluid, however, the clarity of separation between the 'deep'

FIGURE 4



#### RECONNAISSANCE BATTALION, MARINE DIVISION

operating area of the force reconnaissance elements and the 'distant' operating area of the division reconnaissance battalions would have been blurred. In a fast moving offensive

situation, for example, current doctrine invites a nightmare for the maneuver element commanders and the fire support coordinators. Because a restrictive fire support coordination measure, a reconnaissance area of operation (RAO), must be established to protect the team(s) operating in a specific area, maneuver element commanders often find themselves frustrated by team's RAO in his zone of action. Although there are numerous

practical, tactical and fire support issues regarding the deployment and employment of reconnaissance units, it is not my intention to focus on that issue here. I will suggest later, however, that there is a much better way of organizing reconnaissance assets and integrating them into the task organizations for amphibious, conventional and sea-based indirect warfare.

The close reconnaissance required in conventional operations is conducted by the maneuver elements themselves. Maneuver battalions, for example, form organic forward security elements from rifle units and use elements of the surveillance and target acquisition platoon (STA) to perform necessary close reconnaissance tasks.

With the current implosion of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact, there is a general consensus that the future world will continue to unfold increasing friction revolving around competing interests. The 21st century will be characterized by instability as Third World states previously supported by Soviet communism grasp for survival. There is no doubt that the CINCs will continue to require expeditionary forces with the flexibility and sustainability to apply sophisticated combinations of surveillance, presence, show-of-force, and controlled, efficient use of force when diplomacy and deterrence fails. This is the medium where the special operations capable MAGTF will flourish. There are virtually no other forces available which have the utility and versatility of the amphibious task force in this environment. Their ability to raise or lower their profile based on the requirements of a

crisis situation, coupled with the ability to apply force from sea bases which reduce the threat to friendly forces, will be a powerful future capability. Further, the absence of any requirement to establish operating bases ashore will most certainly prove useful in areas where U.S. presence may upset delicate indigenous public opinion efforts. In this arena, however, there is the same intense need for information to facilitate planning and execution of operations as in any other notch on the spectrum of conflict. Further, even with all of the sophisticated technology available to the MAGTF, there will be numerous occasions where there will be no substitute for human surveillance--'eyes on target.'

The application of ground reconnaissance units and organizations to amphibious and conventional operations is less difficult to understand than their application at the low end of the spectrum of conflict. Because of the unique personal characteristics required of individuals who are involved in reconnaissance operations, those organizations have also been assigned the Corps' new roles in the direct action aspects of special operations. It is here that the doctrinal responsibilities of the Corps' reconnaissance units and organizations have become blurred. In some instances, as in the MEU(SOC), we have task organized with insufficient reconnaissance elements to conduct ground reconnaissance, surveillance and direct action special operations simultaneously.

The special operations capabilities of the MAGTF pose attendant requirements for detailed information which cannot be ignored. Those experienced in operations will agree that failure

to obtain accurate information prior to prosecution of special operations invites operational disaster and political national embarrassment. It is imperative that the capabilities of the SOC MAGTFs be assessed now before disaster strikes. Once lost, credibility with the CINCs would be difficult, if not impossible, to regain.

There is nothing mysterious about the special operations capable MAGTFs. All Marine organizations have inherent 'special operations' capabilities as a result of their normal training. Any MAGTF, whether certified as special operations capable or not, has the ability to enter and exit a target area day or night, in bad weather, under emission control (EMCON), and by surface or air from over-the-horizon. They can locate, identify, close with, fix and destroy an enemy with a myriad of task organized elements. The organic reconnaissance elements allow the force to conduct reconnaissance and surveillance of the enemy/target to assess his capabilities, limitations, intentions, etc. Although some Marine organizations train to more stringent standards as the 'force of choice' for operations in certain climates (such as the 6th Marines for North Norway or the 7th Marines for mechanized desert warfare), all Marines are trained to operate in rural and urban areas as well as in an NBC environment.

Today forward deployed MEU's, after an extremely demanding two-year training work-up and certification process, are formally designated special operations capable. Their comprehensive and realistic specialized training is conducted in close coordination with the amphibious ready group. The individual and collective



skills acquired through the training and the use of specialized equipment are complemented by an operational philosophy which emphasizes rapid execution under time-compressed planning. At a minimum, each MAGTF is expected to commence mission execution signified by launch of surface means or aircraft within six hours of receipt of a warning or alert order.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 5 lists the 18 "SOC" missions used to certify the capability within a MAGTF. Those marked with an asterisk require the participation of, or in some cases execution by,

#### FIGURE 5

\* (+) = Reconnaissance Elements Required  
 \* (-) = Reconnaissance Elements Sometimes Required

- \* (+) 1. Amphibious Raids
- 2. Security Operations
- \* (+) 3. Limited Objective Attacks
- \* (-) 4. Mobile Training Teams
- \* (-) 5. Noncombatant Evacuation Operations (NEO)
- 6. Show-of-Force Operations
- \* (-) 7. Reinforcement Operations
- 8. Civic Actions
- \* (-) 9. Deception Operations
- \* (-) 10. Fire Support Control
- 11. Counterintelligence (CI) Operations
- \* (+) 12. Initial Terminal Guidance
- \* (-) 13. Electronic Warfare
- \* (-) 14. Military Operations in Urban Terrain (MOUT)
- \* (+) 15. Clandestine Recovery Operations
- \* (+) 16. Tactical Recovery of A/C and Personnel (TRAP)
- \* (+) 17. In-Extremis Hostage Rescue
- \* (+) 18. Specialized Demolition Operations

11

#### THE 18 SPECIAL OPERATIONS MISSIONS

ground reconnaissance elements of the MAGTF. The force reconnaissance companies, however, possess the requisite skills which allow the SOC organizations to execute maritime special operations tasks (Figure 6).

The concept and organization of the MEU(SOC) is currently well understood because current operational requirements dictate that one be continually afloat in the Mediterranean and one in the Western Pacific. There is much confusion, however, regarding the concept of MEB/MEF(SOC) or MAGTF(SOC). Current generation of

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#### FIGURE 6

1. Close Quarters Battle (CQB)
2. Specialized Breaching
3. Improvised Explosive Devices (IED)
4. Clandestine Reconnaissance and Surveillance
5. TRAP Operations
6. In-Extremis Hostage Rescue
7. Seizure and Destruction of Offshore Gas/Oil Platforms (GOPLAT)
8. Other (Classified)

12

#### MARITIME SPECIAL OPERATIONS SPECIAL SKILLS/TRAINING

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the special operations capability within the MAGTF is conducted by the formation of the maritime special purpose force (MSPF) from within the SRIG of the MEF. It seems logical that the Corps should be able to simply attach additional assets to the MEU task organization to generate a MEB(SOC) and simply use all of the elements necessary for the MEF(SOC). Figure 7 represents the currently accepted diagram as presented by Colonel Jim Magee, Head, Special Operations in Low Intensity Branch, Headquarters Marine Corps. He further states, "MAGTF(SOC) is built on the current operational and training enhancements evident in the close working relationship with the Navy reflected in the amphibious ready group/(ARG/MEU(SOC) training and certification process. This program has been the catalyst for increased interoperability and the dramatically improved capabilities of forces, particularly for precise operations at night and on short

notice. There are, however, simply not enough assets to provide every deployed MAGTF with the capability, as one can see from Figure 6. As currently staffed, there is only sufficient capability to support the deployed MEU(SOC)s. Any others must be configured from overflow assets or by absorption of the MEU(SOC) itself by a MEB.

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FIGURE 7  
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	MEU	MEB	MEF
Special Mission Cmd Element	BLT 'B' CmdGrp SRI Det (-) *Note 1	RLT 'B' Cmd Grp Det SRI (-) BLT 'A' Cmd Grp	SOTG W/ SRIG (-) Augment
Strike Element	SRI Det(-) *Note 2 BLT (-) *Note3	SRI Det (-) Recon Co, Recon Bn LAI Co	SRI Det (-) Recon Bn LAI Bn
Covering Element	BLT Raid Co LAI Co(-)	RLT Raid Co LAI Bn (-)	RLT Raid Co(s) LAI Bn (-)
Aviation Element	Composite Squadron *Note 4	MAG *Note 5	MAW *Note 6

Note 1: Det ANGLICO, Det Rad Bn, Med Tm, RPV Plt, Deception Tm

Note 2: Force Recon DA Plt, Possible NAVSPECWAR Det

Note 3: STA, EOD, Cbt Eng, Recon Plt Recon Bn

Note 4: MSPF trained and experienced helo crews

Note 5: MSPF level trained helo crews

Note 6: Helo crews from returned MEU(SOC)s

14

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MAGTF(SOC) MARITIME SPECIAL PURPOSE FORCES  
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Note the absence of a true reconnaissance element in the task organizations provided in Figure 7. Although the units capable of conducting such operations are present, they may not be

available depending on what type of mission is assigned. For example, if a MEU(SOC) is tasked to conduct a special operation (i.e., a hostage rescue, which is a spinoff of a conventional operation such as an amphibious raid), the force does not have the organic reconnaissance capability to do both. The direct action platoon (SRI detachment) is trained for the close quarters battle and must do the hostage rescue, the battalion landing team reconnaissance platoon is also in the strike element, and the SEAL team may be involved in everything. Who provides the necessary reconnaissance and surveillance--national assets? Remember that the requirement for MAGTFs to develop special operations capability was generated because of their potential for development of a crisis situation while awaiting the arrival of national assets, or to execute immediately if absolutely required. Inability to conduct ground reconnaissance in support of the assigned mission is simply not acceptable!

It is interesting to note that MEUs, and formerly the Marine Amphibious Units (MAUs), have never deployed with a platoon of the force reconnaissance company to give it a "deep" reconnaissance capability. This will become even more important should the MV-22 Osprey be procured and become available for insertion of organic MAGTF ground reconnaissance elements. Addition of this unit to the task organization of the MEU(SOC) will solve the ground reconnaissance dilemma which the operational commander will eventually face, but will severely tax the force company and eventually the remainder of the reconnaissance community. In my opinion, a MEB(SOC), in order to ensure simultaneous conventional and special operations support to the CINC as advertised, must

deploy with at least three direct action platoons and three reconnaissance platoons of the force reconnaissance company, BRIG. The MEF(SOC) would deploy with all subordinate elements required for mission accomplishment.

In order to provide a sufficient pool of reconnaissance organizations to resolve its current capability shortfall, the Corps must re-evaluate its doctrine for employment of the force companies and reconnaissance battalions. The result will lead to restructuring in order to provide for more efficiency in not only the deployment and employment of these specialized units, but also in the interest of consolidating the expensive equipment, training and specialized facilities necessary to sustain them.

Both current manpower reduction and operational requirements point to elimination of the deep and distant reconnaissance dividing line as the rationale for separation of the reconnaissance units of the MEF. Because reconnaissance units are best used in general support of the force during conventional operations, they should be consolidated at the level of the largest GCE deployed and employed as required to support the MAGTF. At the MEU level, the GCE commander must remain the MAGTF commander's instrument for command and control ashore during all operations, conventional or otherwise. Organized in this manner, the maneuvering commander, the GCE, would have control over all of those elements beyond the line of contact which could restrict his fire support and maneuver. The MAGTF commander could task the GCE commander to use reconnaissance elements to satisfy essential elements of information (EEIs) of concern to him.

The administration, equipping and training of reconnaissance

elements to conduct special operations demands consolidation of the community in the interest of efficiency and cost. A list of the Corps' reconnaissance units/organizations is provided in Figure 8. Note that over half of the Corps' force reconnaissance units are in the reserves.

A proposal for consolidation and reorganization is provided in Figure 9. Note that the proposal makes the reconnaissance battalion of the division the fulcrum for the reorganization. Active force companies should be taken from the SRIG and placed

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#### FIGURE 8

1st Reconnaissance Battalion, 1st MarDiv - Camp Pendleton (SoCal)  
2d Reconnaissance Battalion, 2d MarDiv - Camp Lejune (NC)  
3d Reconnaissance Battalion, 3d MarDiv - Camp Schwab (Okinawa)  
4th Reconnaissance Battalion, 4th MarDiv - Reserves - CONUS  
1st Force Reconnaissance Company - I MEF - Camp Pendleton  
2d Force Reconnaissance Company - II MEF - Camp Lejune  
3d Force Reconnaissance Company - Reserves - Hawaii  
4th Force Reconnaissance Company - Reserves - Alabama  
4th Deep Reconnaissance Platoon - Reserves - Alaska

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#### CURRENT RECONNAISSANCE UNITS/ORGANIZATIONS

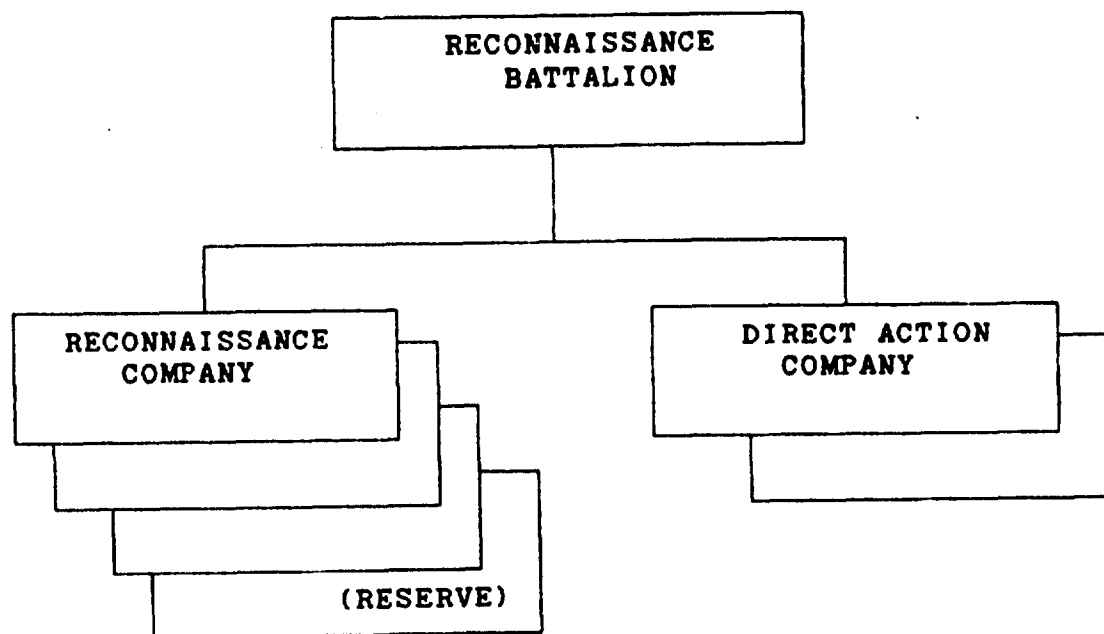
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under the respective division reconnaissance battalions, and all associated structure from the special operations training groups of the MEFs should go with them. The rationale is quite simple. All reconnaissance must be viewed as operational and information-gathering units. The two reserve force companies should be aligned with a reconnaissance battalion, 4th Force with the 2d Reconnaissance Battalion and the 3d Force with the 1st

Reconnaissance Battalion, and moved to Camp Lejeune and Camp Pendleton respectively. The 4th DRP in Alaska should be aligned with the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion and moved to Hawaii to augment 'B' Company, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion which is currently the reconnaissance element of the 1st MEB. This aligns the reserves with the battalion they will support just as we align reserve infantry companies with active battalions. The advantages of consolidation are numerous. The disadvantage is that the MEF commander loses his 'personal' reconnaissance element. Authority to task, however, will prove sufficient. Should special circumstances arise, if the MEF GCE consists of

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**FIGURE 9**



**PROPOSED REORGANIZATION OF RECONNAISSANCE UNITS/ORGANIZATIONS**

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two divisions as in Desert Shield, the MEF commander would have the option of drawing a company or two from the two reconnais-

sance battalions for operations at the MEF level.

To meet the MAGTF requirements of the 21st century, the addition of the special operations capability made sense. We have, however, misrepresented MSPF self sufficiency because of our lack of attention to the reconnaissance requirements. To date, MAGTF commanders have been fortunate that they have not been tasked to conduct extremely intricate independent operations or several operations simultaneously. The problem must be corrected not only to avoid future disaster and subsequent loss of credibility with the national command authorities and the CINCs in the special operations arena, but also to adjust to future conventional requirements and the imminent fiscal austerity we face today.



## FOOTNOTES

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